

# Literacy: Constructing Meaning through Philosophical Inquiry

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Jo, Seon-Hee

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Recently, the perspective on literacy was changed from the view of considering literacy as basic skills of simple correspondence between sound and letter to the view of considering literacy as high level skills which consider the presenter's intention and purpose, and the receptor's background and need in a synthetic communicative context. Literacy is not the translating activity of letters to phonemes, phonemes to letters. Rather, literacy is considered to be very complicated, and a higher mental process in which writers construct meaning and readers reconstruct meaning (Rumelhart, 1981). Literacy also consists of the conventional reading and writing of skillful readers or writers, and the basic skills of oral language.

Alongside the changes on the emphasis in literacy, literacy education has also changed from emphasizing decoding letters and teaching words to emphasizing active interpretation and the construction of the meaning of text.

In early childhood education, literacy education began to emphasize both the child's active reading and the transaction between the child and fairy tales (Rosenblatt, 1989). To emphasize meaning construction, a more natural literature-based content is being used. Recently, literacy activities in young childhood education curriculum emphasize meaning construction using drawing, reading big books, discussing, writing, and remaking stories.

Lipman thought that the meanings were connections and relationships (Lipman, 1991). Vygotsky considered word meaning as the basic unit for meaning construction, and considered meaning construction as making relations between word meanings. According to Dewey, meaning is dependent on perceived connecting context, and meaning construction is the making of connections and relations by interweaving thoughts, words, and actions. Thus, meaning is constructed by searching for or creating various kinds of relationships. Therefore to improve a child's meaning

construction, it is necessary for children to make several kinds of relationships: of word to another word; of word to thing; of thing to another thing. These processes depend on the child's abilities to connect new words, information, and ideas to the child's prior knowledge. There are several effective teaching methods for meaning construction: the experience of reading books stimulated with skillful adult's scaffolding dialogue (Stephanie, 1995), the cooperative activity between adults and children in reading books, listening, and discussing with divergent dialogue (Cochran-Smith, 1984), and the cultivating of children's thinking and imagination by their seniors (Battle, 1993). According to Vygotsky's social construction, children actively make higher mental functions. A child's meaning construction is thus made by the child's own internalization, not by teaching of every skill of meaning construction, nor by transmission from adults. Thus, it is effective to help children to read naturally, to connect present experience to past experience, to get information, and to make meaning in a contextual and synthetic approach.

In these educational contexts, a community of philosophical inquiry, based on Lipman's P4C program for cultivating higher-order thinking, will be effective in improving young children's meaning construction. The reasons are as follows. First, in philosophical inquiry, meaning construction consists of making connections and relations through interweaving. Thus, philosophical inquiry is concerned with relationships of one sort or another: of means to ends; of causes to effects; of parts to wholes; of words to things; of premises to conclusions; of how things seem to how things are; of general rules to specific instances and counter-instances; of things similar and things distinct; and so on (Splitter & Sharp, 1995). Second, it is suggested that the contextual and synthetic approach using fairy tales for young children's meaning construction is effective, so philosophical inquiry is also effective because it is the contextual and synthetic approach in dialogue, inquiry, and community. Third, it is difficult for children to find meaning in a curriculum distant from real life experiences. However, philosophical inquiry is based on real life experiences which are interesting to children. Fourth, philosophical inquiry cultivates insightful question making in interpreting interconnections of experiences.

In this study, the improvement in young children's meaning making by philosophical inquiry is tested in the kindergarten classroom.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It is thought that philosophical inquiry, based on Lipman's P4C, is effective for child's meaning construction because it is based on dialogue, inquiry, and community.

### ***(1) The primary instrument for meaning construction is dialogue.***

In meaning construction as the process of making connections and relations through the interweaving of thoughts, words, and actions, dialogue supplies the ring for the connections. Even though meaningful learning is possible in the absence of dialogue, direct dialogue among people is important in constructing meaning through interweaving other people's views into one's own views. According to Vygotsky, the origin of language is social, not personal, so children's dialogue in a social context is

essential in the development of higher mental function. However, the linguistic interaction through dialogue does not derive the development of higher mental function. The development of higher mental function is developed by internalization of dialogue used in interaction.

One of the characteristics of philosophical inquiry is dialogue. Philosophical dialogue is the most powerful instrument in mastering the domain of rationality. In philosophical inquiry, dialogue makes the interchanges of personal opinions possible, and becomes the source of next inquiry. The subjective personal experience can not be the truth. The meaning of the subjective experience is less useful than the meaning of dialogue.

For dialogue to be effective in meaning construction, it is necessary for the teacher to emphasize several points about philosophical inquiry in the kindergarten classroom. First, make questions with curiosity about topics and ideas. Second, listen carefully to other people. Third, clarify one's own words or those of others. Fourth, try to make one's own words or those of others correct. Fifth, try to make a connection between other people's words. Sixth, try to present alternatives to one's own ideas. Seventh, try to make one's own words or those of others coherent. Eighth, give reasons for, or examples to, one's own opinions.

## ***(2) Meaning construction is made by inquiry.***

The perspective that inquiry is at the heart of meaning construction is also found in Vygotsky, Dewey, and other cognitive scientists writings (Brown & Campione, 1994). Inquiry is about being open to wondering and puzzlement, and trying to construct and test explanations of the phenomena that evoked those feelings (Wells, 2000).

In philosophical inquiry it is necessary to consider several things to make inquiry effective for meaning construction: the parallel between critical thinking and creative thinking, the formulating of questions, the ways of organizing the children's activities, and the teacher's mode of participation.

Meaning construction consists of both preserving and enlarging meaning. In the process of meaning construction, searching for new possibilities is important. Not only creative thinking, but also critical thinking contribute to this search for possibilities. In philosophical inquiry, the straight and parallel intercourse processes between critical thinking and creative thinking define the essence of the inquiry itself. In that process hypothesis/solutions are constructed through critical thinking, and reconstructed through further critical thinking. Thus, critical thinking and creative thinking are emphasized together.

In inquiry activities for meaning construction, the choice of experiences that provide the topics for investigation is critical. Children need to use experiences that generate real questions (Bettencourt, 1991). With a real question, children will wonder about it, and try to make answers to it.

Inquiry is not a method of doing a subject. It is an approach to the chosen themes and topics in which the posing of real questions is positively encouraged (Wells, 2000). Thus, to improve young children's meaning construction it is necessary for all tentative answers to be taken seriously and investigated as rigorously as possible.

In inquiry activities within a kindergarten classroom, teachers need to play three roles: first, teachers should be a co-inquirer; second, teachers must be a leader and organizer of the community; third, teachers must carry out their role as supporter.

### ***(3) Meaning construction is accomplished in the community's activity.***

The definition of community is not simply a group, nor simply individuals. It is the community in which personal opinions are interchanged.

In philosophical inquiry it is necessary to consider several things in order to make the community's activity effective for meaning construction: the children's active participation, the community as a cognitive-psychological entity, the parallel between cooperation and rivalry, and the teacher's mode of participation. Meanings cannot be dispensed or handed out to children from teachers or parents. Meanings must be acquired by children in the community's activity with adults or peers. The children's active role is of utmost importance in meaning construction. The idea of community then, does not necessarily refer to a sense of harmony, but rather to a shared set of social practices and goals that become differentiated among subgroups or idiocultures (Fine, 1987). Thus, in community, the process of activity is not one-way, but it is multidirectional.

Community is not only a social entity, but also a cognitive-psychological entity. The process of socialization is the process of internalization, and the process of internalization is the process of socialization. So community as a social entity is community as a psychological entity.

The ordinary implication of community stresses the cooperation aspect, but the rival aspect of intergroup and intragroup is also important in community. In cognitive psychology, the study of the capacity of the working memory, the selective memory, the availability of mental resources, and the effect of similarity, revealed that individual's cognitive capacity is too narrow to process ideal rationality. Therefore, it is impossible, without intersubjective cooperation and rivalry, to do inquiry.

Children are not transmitted prepared meaning or knowledge from teacher, but they construct it by themselves. This makes mode of the teachers' participation most important. First, teachers should make a liberal atmosphere in the classroom, in which all children speak, think, and discuss freely. Second, teachers should be objective, and consider fair attitudes. Third, teachers must help children to approach, observe, and understand problems with communal thinking. As a result, they must allow enough time for thinking after questions are posed.

## METHOD OF STUDY

### 1. Subjects of Study

A total of 54 five year old Korean children participated: 28 boys and 26 girls(mean age 5 years 5 months). The children were selected from two kindergarten classes in a middle class urban neighborhood in Jinju, Korea.

### 2. Materials

**1) *Meaning construction test.*** The researcher modified and used Kim & Song is (1997) assessment of Young Children's Story Construction From Picture Books based on the Story Construction from a Picture Book of van Kraayenoord & Paris (1996).

A picture book without letters, Mercer Mayer (1967)'s «A Boy, A Dog and A Frog» was used as a test instrument.

In this study, the test consists of 6 questions which consider several kinds of relationships which are possible in the picture: primary search, comment on picture, meta-language, personal engagement, correction strategy, and theme. The researcher gives the questions to the children, and the children answer while reading the picture book with the researcher.

The questions are as follows: «what is this story about?», «in this picture, what is happening?», «what is this boy saying to the frog?», «what is the mood of the frog now?», «what do you think will happen after this story?», «the title of this book is Boy, Frog, and Dog, if you were to make a new title, what could it be?»

**2) *Picture books:*** Teacher introduced a new picture book each week. In total, 24 different picture books were used. During the experiment, the themes discussed with the children were helping, color changes in a dark place, where we can go and can't, friends, changes in shape, possible things and impossible things, weather change, travel, usefulness, rules, sharing with friends, family, difference, naming, dream, happiness, wishes, beauty, appointment, change of mind, reason, gifts, when I am happy, and goodness .

### 3. Procedure

The children were classified into two groups: the experimental group (N=27) and the control group (N=27). Both groups were homeogenous in terms of sex and educational background. To test the effects of the experimental treatment, pre/post tests regarding meaning construction were administered.

**1) *Pre-test:*** The pre-test was carried out for 2 weeks (Mar. 20, 1999 - Apr. 7, 1999). In the pre-test, each child was tested individually in a quiet room by the same person. Each child's test took about 15 minutes.

**2) *Phylosophical inquiry activity:*** After the pre-test, the experimental group received practice with the community of philosophical inquiry, but the control group did not. A 24 week (Apr. -Jul. and Sept. - Nov.) P4C program was applied using picture books in the experimental group. But in the control group, there was no philosophical inquiry activities even though using same picture books. The teaching material used in this study consisted of 24 picture books. The teacher introduced a new book each week.

For the community of philosophical inquiry in this study, the teacher stressed dialogue, inquiry, and community. The teacher established a suitable physical environment with both a stress-free setting, and the formal setting. The children in the experimental group sat at a U-type table, and the teacher sat with the blackboard in the upper-middle of the children's arrangement. The procedure of this study was based on Lipman's Instruction of Philosophy for Children program. In which the teacher, as story-teller, read the whole story and the children listened carefully, rather than each child reading the material one by one.

The philosophical activities of a community of inquiry were divided into 4 steps: • on Monday, the teacher offered a story and constructed an agenda, • on Tuesday, some philosophical discussion occurred, • on Wednesday, children were given an opportunity to make up a story, and • on Thursday, they all participated in a drama acting. It is important to note that every step must be based on the previous step so that each step is inter-related. The activity time for every step was approximately 30 minutes (between 10:10 AM to 10:40 AM).

**3) *Post-test:*** The post-test was carried out for 2 weeks (Nov. 20, 1999 - Dec. 7, 1999). In the post-test, each child was tested in the same procedure by the same person.

#### **4. Analysis of data**

The meaning construction test used in this study consisted of 6 questions. The score of the relating answer was 1, and the score of the non-relating or non-answer was 0. The range of score was from 0 to 6 points.

With SPSS 10.0 for Window, the difference between pre-test and post-test was tested by Paired-Sample t-test, and the difference between experimental group and control group was tested by Independent-Sample t-test.

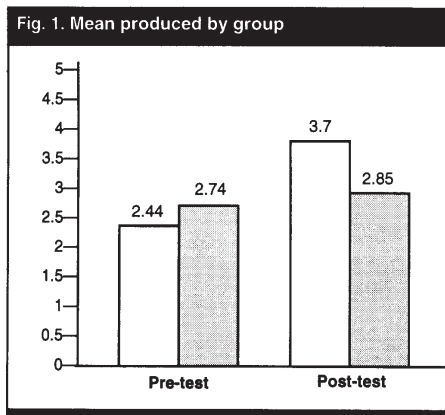
## **RESULTS**

Mean and standard deviation were tabulated and entered into a Paired-Sample t-test and an Independent-Sample t-test.



Table 1. Mean and SD produced by groups					
	pre-test	Post-test	Mean Difference	Paired t	Sig. t
exp. group	2.44±1.81	3.70±1.28	-1.26	-4.559***	.000
cont. group	2.74±1.52	2.85±1.16	-.11	-.659	.513
t	-.922	3.625***			
Sig. t	.359	.000			

In the pre-test, control group. But in the post-test, the mean of meaning construction was significantly different the mean of meaning construction was not significantly different between the experimental and the between these two groups ( $t=3.625$ ,  $p<.001$ ). In the control-group, the mean of meaning construction was not significantly different between the pre-test and the post-test. But in the experimental-group, the mean of meaning construction was significantly different between the two tests (paired  $t=-4.559$ ,  $p<.001$ ).



This analysis revealed significant effects of group condition in the meaning construction scores. The experimental group received the practice of the community of philosophical inquiry showed a higher meaning construction score ( $M = 3.7$ ), whilst the control group ( $M = 2.85$ ) did not.

In the secure, structured environment of the community of philosophical inquiry, the meaning construction of 5 year-old children was improved.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The quantitative analysis of meaning construction response indicates that the practice of community of philosophical inquiry is useful in improving the meaning construction of younger children. This finding confirms that Philosophy for Children program is effective for enhancing literacy of younger children. The idea that the development of meaning construction is tied to the growth function of the community of philosophical inquiry has important implications for the way educators view such development in relation to the children's activities.

Previously, many studies of Philosophy for Children programs approved the educational effectiveness of improvement of language competence and reasoning competence in older children. However, in this study, the educational effectiveness of Philosophy for Children is confirmed in the meaning construction of kindergarten aged children living in Korea and having an oriental cultural background. Along with other studies (Io & Park, 1999; Jo & Yu, 1999) on the community of philosophical inquiry

in Korean kindergarten, these findings confirm the possibility and effectiveness of the community of philosophical inquiry in kindergarten classroom.

Based on the findings, it can be suggested that the Philosophy for Children program should be incorporated into early childhood activities in a variety of ways, depending on the materials to be discussed, and the commitments and constraints of the teacher and the class size.

It is recommended that further studies on the qualitative evaluation of children's dialogue produced in the community of inquiry be validly conducted to verify the effects of Philosophy for Children program objectively.

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*Address correspondence to:*

**Jo, Seon-hee**  
**Associate Professor**  
**Department of Early Childhood Education**  
**Jinju College**  
**Korea**  
**e-mail: shjo3@hanmail.net**

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